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Well-Intentioned Fantasy?
A Response to Bruno Frey's 'Proposals for a Democracy of the Future'

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Abstract. We argue that Frey's proposals are utopian and impractical, focusing on four key issues: the complexity of decision-making; politicians' and technocrats' importance in decision making processes; reconciling the geography of political rights in a globalising world; and recognizing how power frames political discourse and outcomes.

Keywords: democracy, voting procedures, equality, rights

While we share Frey's concerns regarding democracy's global future and applaud some of his provocative proposals, nevertheless many of his suggestions appear utopian and impractical. They are utopian because they are predicated on assumptions that people are rational, deeply interested in participating in public decision making, and are able and willing to devote considerable time and resources towards formulating informed judgements on matters of public concern. They are impractical because they are not suitable for coherent, long-term planning and would likely generate significant (and economically damaging) political uncertainty and instability.

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Our discussion of his proposals focus on four key issues: the complexity of democratic decision-making; the valuable roles politicians and technocrats play in such decision-making; the challenge of reconciling the geography of political rights in a globalising world; and the importance of recognizing how power fundamentally frames political discourse and outcomes.

1. Countries are not Companies

Underpinning Frey's proposals is a tacit assumption that 'democracy' is primarily a function of the operations of a unitary state with clear objectives, and with decision-making structures that can be tweaked to promote greater input from key stakeholders. More succinctly, he seems to view the democratic state as a kind of company; indeed, he directly compares decision-making processes in both. This is problematic.

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The governing apparatus of a modern democratic society is extremely complex. Unlike companies, which have a singular overarching goal (i.e. profit), democratic societies are in a constant state of negotiating and implementing goals that entail trade-offs in the allocation of public resources. Even when a goal appears to be collectively agreed, there is often fierce debate on the means of achieving it. (Nobody told President Trump that health care 'could be so complicated'!)

Moreover, modern democracies are better understood as a form of political 'catallaxy', to borrow a term from Hayek (1978). They are an emergent phenomenon comprised of many individuals, organisations and agencies engaged in a constant but structured competition to set goals and acquire a share of the resources derived from taxation. In other words, it would be more apt to compare a democratic order to an economic system, rather than conceptualise it as the product of the functions of a singular actor in the system (i.e. the 'state').

Electorates play a crucial role in shaping the catallaxy by electing legislatures and governments committed to an explicit political programme of policies to achieve defined goals – for which actions they will be held to account. But frequent interference with those actions, through mechanisms associated with direct democracy (such as referendums) is more likely to impede than ensure success.

2. In Praise of Politicians and Technocrats

There is a substantial body of empirical research showing that very few electors take the time to assemble information and engage in critical debate to formulate informed, rational judgements about questions of public policy—and then vote accordingly (see Achen and Bartels 2016). Instead, most people act on partial information and use short-cut heuristics to come to judgements, such as whether or not they 'like' a party leader, or how they feel about the way issues are rhetorically framed (see Weston 2006), or how questions are asked (Kahneman, 2011). Moreover, there is abundant evidence that most people do not want to be regularly consulted: low turnout rates at elections, referendums and other votes tend to occur in places where opportunities to vote are most frequent (Qvortrup, 2005). And there is no convincing evidence that offering other means of voting, such as by post or electronically, substantially increases turnout or stimulates participation among those who normally abstain.

As V. O. Key (1966) once observed, for most people politics is just 'a side-show in the circus of life'. Many other things take precedence in the contest for their attention. For 'good' decisions to be made that genuinely reflect real collective preferences and interests (as opposed to perceived interests) people need both the motivation and means to engage deeply in deliberative processes. Yet, as many commentators of the contemporary scene are making clear, there are growing numbers of individuals in many societies who are choosing not to participate in electoral politics (Evans and Tilley, 2017) or have decided to use other means of expressing their views and pursuing their goals (Gest, 2016). Frey's utopian goals are unachievable unless the alienation, anxiety and anomie underpinning these trends can be addressed (Standing, 2016).

The professionalization of politics and politicians in representative democracies, which Frey clearly disapproves of, is a partial (very imperfect) solution to the problem of voter apathy and irrational decision-making. It is a form of specialisation in the political sphere that makes decision-making more efficient—a corollary in some respects to specialisation and exchange in the market place. Politicians are professional story-tellers and decision-makers. They develop rhetorical heuristics about key issues for the voting public and—crucially—specialise in understanding the complex trade-offs in policymaking that derive from the fact of limited resources and the inherent conflicts of interests among different segments of society. Politicians are charged with understanding legal intricacies, budget processes and particular governance challenges (e.g. related to transport of public health) that would take average voters years to get to grips with. And they have legions of specialists and bureaucrats to consult in the formulation of new policies or plans. Even so, the sheer magnitude of the legislative task limits the extent to which any individual can be well-

informed on every issue—especially in larger countries. As a result, even within the realm of professional politics there is further specialisation (e.g. through committee structures and commissions) as well as institutionalised heuristics (e.g. party whips) to facilitate collective decision-making. As noted below, we are naturally concerned by evidence that professional politicians tend to come from privileged backgrounds. This is a problem. But this problem should not be conflated with the issue of political professionalization per se (on which see Lamprinakou et al., 2017).

In short, professional politicians and bureaucrats are often in a better position to make informed judgements on matters of public policy than the general public. This is not a popular assertion, but it is almost certainly true. This doesn't mean that the public should not be regularly consulted. But it highlights the appropriate role of elections in democracy: to establish a broad direction of collective travel through the election of representatives who articulate desirable goals for society, not to micromanage the pursuit of those goals.

This is all the more important as political units grow in size. Frey approaches the subject from an admittedly (and uniquely) Swiss perspective. But the population of Switzerland is roughly that of the County of Greater London. What works in Switzerland is almost certainly not transferable to substantially larger countries.[3] Indeed, Frey doesn't address the question of scale at all. He would be wise to reflect on Robert Dahl's observation concerning the physical limits of direct democracy:

> [Nothing] can overcome the dismal fact that as the number of citizens increases the proportion who can participate *directly* in discussions with their top leaders must necessarily grow smaller and smaller. The inherent constraint is neither evil men nor evil institutions, nor any other eradicable aspect of human life, but rather a dimension of all existence that is morally neutral, because it is implacable, unswerving, and inescapable — time (Dahl 1967, 957).

Just as specialisation and exchange allows economies to grow increasingly complex and productive, specialisation in politics, in the form of professional politicians and bureaucrats, allows societies to successfully tackle increasingly complex collective challenges through informed, deliberative decision-making processes.

3. People, Places and Political Rights

[3] See Lea Raible and Leah Trueblood, 'The Swiss system of referendums and the impossibility of direct democracy': https://ukconstitutionallaw.org/2017/04/04/lea-raible-and-leah-trueblood-the-swiss-system-of-referendums-and-the-impossibility-of-direct-democracy/ (accessed 13 April 2017).

Frey raises an interesting point in noting that disenfranchised foreigners are uniquely dissatisfied in Switzerland. This speaks to a broader issue about who should have rights to vote where—an issue that has grown in significance with the intensification of international labour mobility, especially in the EU.

Should a French worker who lives, works and pays taxes in the UK have voting rights in the UK? Should a British expatriate permanently residing in Spain have voting rights in the UK? And which local government area should a commuter vote in: the place residence or place of work, or both?

Within a democratic system Frey's proposed solution to such questions is voting with variable weights. This is an unprincipled proposal – as are his parallel arguments for voting rights weighted by age. Why should an individual's political rights appreciate or depreciate in mechanical fashion with the passage of time? One is either a member of the *demos*, directly affected by the decisions and actions of a government, or not. We fully agree that citizenship status should not decide the allocation voting rights (see Fox, Johnston and Manley 2016), but rights cannot be granted in fractions. One would not consider a partial right to due process in law, or a partial right to freedom of assembly. This is a slippery slope. The franchise should be granted in full in line with a reasonable interpretation of the principle of affected interests.

Underpinning Frey's proposal—particularly with regard to commuters and local electoral rights—is an assumption that political boundaries are fixed. He does not consider the alternative to rigging vote shares: redrawing political boundaries. Here there is almost certainly scope for constructive reforms. As towns and cities grow, and as functional metropolitan regions emerge consisting of constellations of discrete but interdependent settlements, old political boundaries and structures may need revising. And gerrymandering has distorted representation in many democracies, contributing to voter apathy and cynicism and, in the case of the United States, an ideological polarisation of legislatures (McGann et al., 2016; Daley, 2016). Rather than introduce arbitrary rules about variable weights, perhaps our attention should be focused on modernizing the political geography of troubled democracies.

4. On Probability and Power

Perhaps the most intriguing and superficially appealing of Frey's proposals is the introduction of randomness and probability to shake up decision-making processes with a view towards disrupting entrenched power structures. As quantitatively-oriented social scientists we are drawn to such an idea. But as historically-minded ones we find it naïve.

People who are not motivated to undertake the detailed calculus required to make informed electoral decisions are open to the influence of myriad interest groups. This influence can be exercised directly, by promising certain outcomes in return for political support, or indirectly by shaping public perception (e.g. through the media). The proponents of different views regarding a proposal may well have different resources available with which to put their case to the electorate, which subverts the principle of equality that underpins the philosophy of democratic practice. There is plenty of evidence that money can 'buy' votes, especially in countries (such as the USA) where constitutional protections around freedom of speech allow essentially unlimited campaign spending by interest groups. More perniciously, those with resources and influence can deploy less explicit 'nudge' strategies to influence public opinion and behaviour (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009; Shipman, 2016). Inequality of resources across interest groups therefore translates into unequal influence. A bit of chance won't significantly alter this situation. Indeed, key influencers could conceivably rig such systems in their favour or insulate themselves through hedging.

Economic equality is needed to ensure that all citizens have the same opportunity not only to evaluate information to arrive at informed judgments, but also to seek to influence others as they undertake the same tasks. This is a problem in a world where most democracies are not only highly unequal, but becoming more so. What is more, many societies now also contain a substantial, and growing, precariat (Standing, 2016), comprising many individuals and households who are denizens but not citizens: without full citizenship and the rights that go with it, these people (many but not all of them migrants) are excluded from the franchise and so unable to influence political decisions through democratic channels. Conversely, the 'professional political class' is increasingly dominated by individuals from particular backgrounds and with particular value and attitude sets, termed the 'anywheres' by Goodhart (2017; on the British case see Criddle, 2015).

Equality of political rights does not ensure equal political influence, and increasing the role of direct participation risks exacerbating inequality of influence by giving those with the greatest resources even more opportunity to exercise their voice. But introducing an element of randomness, or in some other way altering an electoral system, would not change structural imbalances in power (and voice) in a society, and is therefore unlikely to alter electoral outcomes substantially in the long run.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, Frey's title is misleading. His proposals are not about democracy per se but rather participation in decision-making processes. Yet democracy isn't just about how policy

decisions are made; it is also about the rule of law, the protection of universal civil and political rights, and the institutionalisation of mechanisms for holding our leaders to account.

Democracies across the West appear increasingly vulnerable to populist movements that threaten to erode several of these pillars of true democracy, inspired by a growing fissure between those who have benefited from the steady march towards a liberal global order and those who feel they have not (Goodhart, 2017). Against this backdrop Frey's diagnosis is flawed and his proposed remedies inadequate. People do not want to spend more time and effort pouring over legislative proposals or micromanaging policy development and implementation. Indeed, it is not uncommon in Britain today for people to moan about 'yet another election'. Representative democracy—rather than direct democracy—is therefore a useful tool. But it requires regular maintenance. Rather than introduce new and clever voting technologies, we would encourage a focus first on fixing what is clearly broken. Three issues in particular stand out.

First, the distribution of voting rights has become increasingly distorted through international migration. Modernising the franchise would empower many millions of adults to re-engage with formal political processes in their country of residence. Second, political boundary revision is required in many places to correct for past manipulations and (less perniciously) distortions arising from the geodemographic evolution of human settlements. Third, concerted efforts need to be made to redress the economic inequalities that translate directly into political inequalities (and political grievances). It is impossible to create and sustain perfect equality (Everett and Everett 2015), which would be required for Frey's vision of direct democracy to be viable. But more could surely be done to counter recent trends towards increasing inequality. Without much greater economic and social equality a true democracy can never be created.

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